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AUTHOR Williams, Ronald; Wolfram, Walt
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ABSTRACT

The characteristics of several nonstandard dialects of American English are presented in this paper in the form of an inventory of features. It has been compiled with the recognition that nonstandard dialects are governed by pronunciation and grammatical rules and that within the broad category of nonstandard dialects, regional and ethnic variations occur. The code used in the inventory to designate major varieties of nonstandard dialects consists of: (1) NS--used in all nonstandard varieties of American English, including northern white NS, southern white NS, and black English; (2) SWNS--southern white NS; (3) S--southern white standard (possible considered nonstandard in some northern contexts); and (4) BE--black English. The inventory includes sections on consonant cluster reduction; the "th" sounds; the "r" and "l" sounds; final "b," "d," and "g"; nasalization; vowel glides; verb constructions; the copula verb concord; negation; the possessive forms; plurals; pronominal apposition; relative clauses; questions; demonstratives; and pronouns. (JM)

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A LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF SOCIAL DIALECTS

Ronald Williams

and

Walt Wolfram

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Department of Communication Sciences
Federal City College

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In this section, we shall present an abbreviated inventory of some of the descriptive characteristics of several different nonstandard dialects of American English. We have opted to present these in terms of an inventory of features rather than a lengthy discursive account. This means that many of the finer details have been omitted here. More elaborate accounts of these features can be found in Labov, et al. (1968), Wolfram (1969), Fasold and Wolfram (1970) and Wolfram and Fasold (1974).

The following description of various nonstandard American dialects clearly demonstrates their systematic nature. Like all languages, these dialects are governed by regular pronunciation and grammacical rules. In short, what is distinctive about nonstandard dialects is that they are held in low esteem by the speakers of standard dialects and usually by their speakers as well. Nonstandard dialects are not any less a language or any less capable of performing all of the tasks of a language than a standard dialect. It is important to note that many of these features occur variably. That is, a particular dialect may be characterized by the frequency with which certain variants occur rather than their categorical occurrence.

Within the broad category of nonstandard dialects, there are variations which are regional and ethnic. The following code is used here to designate some major varieties of nonstandard dialects and to indicate in which of these dialects certain features are most often found:

NS	Used in all nonstandard varieties of American English, including Northern White NS, Southern White NS and Black English.
SWNS	Southern White NS
S	Southern White Standard (possibly considered nonstandard in some Northern contexts).
BE	Black English

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Pronunciation

Consonant Cluster Reduction

(BE/some SWNS dialects)

1. Word-final consonant clusters ending in a stop can be reduced when both members belong to a base word: tes (test), des (desk), han (hand), and buil (build).

Reduction also occurs when grammatical suffix -ed is added to produce such words as rubbed, rained, messed, looked. Reduced: rub, rain, mess, and look.

When both members of a cluster are either voiced or voiceless, then the rule operates (as above), but when one member is voiced and the other voiceless (e.g. jump, rent, belt, gulp, etc.), the rule does not operate.

In Standard English (SE), final member of a cluster may be absent if following word begins with a consonant (bes' kind, tol' Jim, col' cuts, and fas' back are acceptable in SE).

(BE/some SWNS)

Reduction takes place when consonant cluster is followed by a vowel or a pause as well as a consonant: wes' en' (west end), bes' apple (best apple). The type of clusters affected by this rule are given in Table 4.

(BE/some SWNS)

2. Plural Formations: words ending in -sp, -st, and -sk, add the -es instead of -s plural. Plural formations follow consonant reduction rule in which words such as desk, test, ghost, and wasp become desses, tesses, ghosses, and wasses.

(BE)

3. Underlying Structure of Consonant Cluster: clusters present in testing, scolding, tester, coldest. When suffix begins with vowel the cluster is present. Some dialects having tessing, scolling, etc., may not have underlying cluster.

The TH- Sounds

(NS)

1. Word initial: d/th as in dey for they t/th as in taught for thought (special kind of t-unaspirated, lenis).

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Table 4. Word-final Clusters in which the Final Member of the Cluster may be Absent **

Phonetic Cluster	Examples*	
	Type I	Type II
[st]	test, post, list	missed, messed, dressed
[sp]	wasp, clasp, grasp	
[sk]	desk, risk, mask	
[št]		finished, latched, cashed
[zd]		raised, composed, amazed
[žd]		judged, charged, forged
[ft]	left, craft, cleft	laughed, stuffed, roughed
[vd]		loved, lived, moved
[nd]	mind, find, mound	rained, fanned, canned
[md]		named, foamed, rammed
[ld]	cold, wild, old	called, smelled, killed
[pt]	apt, adept, inept	mapped, stopped, clapped
[kt]	act, contact, expect	looked, cooked, cracked

*Where there are no examples under Type I and Type II the cluster does not occur under that category.

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(BE) 2. Within a word: f/th as in nofin for nothing, Aufuh for Author

(some BE dialects) v/th as in bruvah for brother, ravah for rather, bavin for bothing.

(AS) th- contigous to a nasal is produced as a t, as in arithmetic ('rithmetic), monthly (montly), nothing (not'n).

(NS) d/th as in odah for other, brudah for brother.

(SWNS/BE) 3. Voiced fricatives before nasals: th, z, v, become stops before a nasal as in idn't for isn't, selm for seven.

(some SWNS/BE) 4. Word final: f/th predominant production as in Ruf (Ruth), toof (tooth), and souf (south).

(BE) t/th occasionally (mostly in Southern BE) as in sout' for south.

The R and L

(S) 1. After a vowel: the l becomes uh, as in steal (steauh), sister (sistuh).

(S) 2. Preceding a consonant: the r and l are absent, as in help (hep), torte (taught). Typically, l is completely absent before labial consonants.

(SWNS/BE) In some areas of the South r absent following o and u, doe (door), foe (four), show (sure).

(SWNS/BE) 3. Between vowels: the r or l may be absent between vowels (Ca'ol, sto'y, or Ma'y, for Carol, story, or Mary).

(BE) 4. Effect on vocabulary and grammar: consistent loss of r at end of word has caused merging of two words. The change caused by the absence of r in they and their or in you and your brings them phonetically closer together. These forms are then produced: It is they book or It is you book.

(BE/SWNS) Loss of l may affect contrasted forms, such as in future modal will. Tomorrow

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I bring the thing for Tomorrow I'll bring the thing. This pronunciation may account for the use of be to indicate future time. He be here in a few minutes. The pronunciation rule for the loss of contracted I'll is when the following word begins with b, m, or w (labial sounds) the ('ll) is dropped, producing I be working tomorrow.

(SWNS/BE)

5. After initial consonant -r: the r may be absent when it follows a consonant in unstressed syllables, giving p'otect for protect or p'fessor or when following vowel is either an o or u, giving th'ow for throw and th'ough for through.

6. Social stigma: absence of r and l not as socially stigmatized as other non-standard pronunciation rules because certain types of r and l absences are standard for some standard Northern dialects (e.g. New England dialect).

Final b, d, and g

(BE)

1. Devoicing: at end of syllable voiced stops b, d, and g are pronounced as the corresponding voiceless stops p, t, and k. This does not mean that pig and pick, bud and butt, and cab and cap sound alike in BE, for they are still distinguished by length of vowel. English vowels are held slightly longer when following sound is voiced. For example, the u in bud is held longer than the u in butt, although the d in bud is pronounced as a t.

In unstressed syllables rule can operate for all nonstandard dialects, as in stupit for stupid.

(BE)

2. Deletion of d: in some varieties of BE d is absent more frequently when followed by a consonant, such as ba' man, goo' soldier, etc. The addition of an -s (realized phonetically as z) suffix produces a kiz for kids and boahz for boards.

(BE)

3. Glottal for t, d before syllable l or n. This results in pronunciations of bu'ton

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something like <u>couttn</u> and <u>bottle</u> with a glottal for the <u>tt</u>.

Nasalization

(NS) 1. <u>The -ing suffix</u>: the use of <u>-in</u> for <u>-ing</u>, such as in <u>singin'</u>, <u>buyin'</u>, and <u>runnin'</u> is a feature characteristic of American English.

(BE) 2. <u>Nasalized vowels</u>: Use of nasalized vowel instead of nasal consonant is most often found at end of syllable, for example final consonant is dropped in <u>man</u>, <u>bun</u>, and <u>run</u>. The final vowel is then nasalized giving <u>ma'</u>, <u>bu'</u>, and <u>ru'</u>. Not consistent. Usually found in unstressed syllables, e.g. <u>mailman</u>.

(S) 3. <u>The influence of nasals on i and e</u>: before a nasal consonant <u>i</u> and <u>e</u> do not contrast, making words such as <u>pin</u> and <u>pen</u> or <u>tin</u> and <u>ten</u> sound identical.

(NS) 4. <u>Articles</u>: difference between <u>a</u> and <u>an</u> is neutralized so that <u>a</u> occurs before words beginning with vowels and consonants, e.g. <u>a apple</u>, <u>a orange</u>, <u>a peas</u>.

Vowel Glides

(S) The vowel glides as in <u>ay</u> (e.g. <u>side</u> and <u>time</u>) and <u>oy</u> (e.g. <u>boy</u> and <u>toy</u>) are generally pronounced as <u>aad</u>, <u>taim</u> and <u>boah</u> and <u>toah</u>.

(S) Absence of glide more frequent when followed by a voiced sound or a pause; more likely to be absent in <u>side</u>, <u>time</u>, and <u>toy</u> than in <u>kite</u>, <u>bright</u>, or <u>fight</u>.

Other

(BR/SWNS) <u>Str-</u> words (<u>string</u>, <u>street</u>) may become <u>skr-</u> words (<u>skring</u>, <u>skreet</u>).

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Grammar

Past Forms

(SE)

1. Regular: the -ed suffixes which mark past tense, past participal forms and derived adjectives are not pronounced because of consonant reduction rule, where finished, cashed, forged, cracked and named are pronounced in SE as finisht, casht, forgd, crackt, and namd and in BE as finish, cash, forge, crack, and name.

(NS)

Where -ed is added to a base ending in -t or -d, it is pronounced as -ed. It is rarely absent. However, the -id can be reduced to d in SE and NS: Eliminating i in -id in such forms as wanted or started leave wanted wantd or stard, which are reduced to -d. This results in He stard crying (He started crying) and He wanda go (He wanted to go).

(NS)

2. Irregular: tendency to regularize past forms for irregular ones by added -ed; knowed for knew, teached for taught. Relatively infrequent in the NS dialects.

Extended use of non-past form. Small set of verbs may use no different form for past and non-past contexts. Most prominent some as in Yesterday he come over. Others include say (BE in particular) and give.

Perfective Constructions

1. General: the Perfective Constructions in NS and SE.

	NS	SE
Present Perfect	I have walked. I('ve) walked.	I have walked. I've walked.
Past Perfect	I had walked.	I had walked. I'd walked.
Completive	I done walked. (SWNS/BE)	
Remote Time	I been walked. (BE)	

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2. Omission of Forms of Have: In SE present tense forms of auxiliary have can be contracted to 've and 's:

SE	NS
I've been here for hours.	I been here for hours.
He's gone home.	He gone home.

Past perfect tense is formed with have plus a general past form. Some NS speakers give He done it, He did it, and They have did it.

(BE/SWNS)

3. Completive Aspects with Done: done plus a past form I done tried. This form denotes an action started and completed at a specific time in the past.

(BE)

4. Remote Time Construction with Been: been construction indicates speaker thinks of action having taken place in the distant past. Unlike done, the been construction is used solely in BE, according to data available at this time. BOTH CONSTRUCTIONS ARE RELATIVELY RARE IN NORTHERN CITIES.

I been had it there for about three years. You won't get your dues that you been paid.

Third Person Singular Present Tense Marker

1. General: the suffix -s (or -es) is used to mark the third person singular in the present tense:

Singular	Plural
I walk	we walk
you walk	you walk
he walks, the man walks	they walk, the men walk

(BE)

The -s suffix is absent; it is not part of the grammar: he walk, the man walk, they walk, the men walk.

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(NS)

2. The verb do used as an auxiliary in negative constructions. He doesn't go becomes He don't go.

(BE)

3. Have and Do: third person forms (has and does) are absent, giving He have a bike and He always do silly things.

(BE)

4. Hypercorrect Forms: absence of -s suffix in BE causes hypercorrections when BE speakers come into contact with SE. BE speakers observe presence of -s suffix in some present tense verbs. Unfamiliar with the restriction of -s suffix to third person singular forms, the speaker uses the feature as a foreign language learner might by marking first, second, third person forms both singular and plural and the -s suffix.

This accounts for sentences such as I walks, You walks, and The children walks. The -s suffix then is an importation of a dialectal feature and over generalized to the grammar of the dialect from which it was borrowed.

Future

(SWNS/BE)

1. Gonna: gonna, as in other dialects, is a future indicator. Is and are are frequently deleted when gonna is used. He gonna go. You gonna get into trouble.

(BE)

SE produces a reduction of gonna: gna (I'gna go). In BE three reductions not observed in SE are found: mana (I'mana go), mon (I'mon go), and ma (I'ma go).

(NS)

2. Will: will is used to indicate future time in SE and NS. Will can be contracted to 'll. This contracted form may be eliminated, especially if the following word begins with a labial consonant (particularly BE). He miss you tomorrow for He'll miss you tomorrow. Sometimes it appears that the future is indicated by main verb alone.

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Invariant be

1. General: the verb to be appears in SE in one of the three variant forms is, are, or am. In BE the form be can be used as a main verb (I be here in the evening and Sometime he be busy).

The use of invariant be in BE has two explanations.

(NS) 2. Will be or would be: be begins with a labial consonant making it likely that 'll before be will be absent. Application of this rule is fairly common in BE and occurs sometimes in SE, giving sentences like He be here pretty soon and They be gone by evening.

The contracted form of would is 'd which can merge with the b of be or be removed by the final elimination rule. A sentence such as If you gave him a present, he be happy is possible both in SE and BE.

(BE) 3. Habitative or non-tense be: the other source of invariant be is possible in BE without tense specification and seems to describe "an object or an event distributed intermittently in time." To say "I'm good" is to assert a permanent quality. While I be good means that the speaker is good sometimes. This form of invariant be is quite socially stigmatized.

A-verb-ing

(WSNS) This use of a prefix tends to occur only in Appalachian speech with the present participle of the verb. It seems to indicate a uniquely durative action--a relatively long-term activity. Sample sentences are I was a-farming in those days, She's a-working in the field.

Absence of forms to be

1. General: when contracted forms of the

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copula *is* and *are* forms are expected in SE, some nonstandard dialects may delete. When the subject is *I*, the SE form *am* or its contraction *'m* is almost always used.

(BE) 2. *Is*: *Is* may be absent before *gonna* in some Southern dialects, but in BE *is* may be absent whenever it can be contracted in SE. *He a man*, *He bad*, and *He running to school*. *Is* and *are* are present in grammar of speakers of BE as evidenced in exposed clause (*I know he is*) and in tag question (*He is not home, is he?*).

(WSNS/BE) 3. *Are*: in all nonstandard dialects of English in which copula absence is found, *are* is used less often than *is*. English contraction rule removes all but final consonant of certain auxiliaries (*are* to *'re*, *will* to *'ll*, and *have* to *'ve*). *Are* has no final consonant, i.e. it is pronounced *ah*. Regular pronunciation rules reduce *ah* to *uh*. Contraction rule eliminates *are*, and there is no need to use BE rules. Thus, there are speakers who have *are* absences but not *is* absences.

Copula Verb Concord

(NS) *They was there*. *You was there*. Some speakers show no person number agreement with *be*. This pertains to both past (*You was there*) and present forms of *to be*. It's use with past tense forms (e.g. *You was there*) is much more frequent than with non-past forms (*They is here*).

Negation

(NS) 1. *The use of ain't for have/has and am/are/is*: a series of phonetic changes in the history of English produced *ain't* for the negative forms of *is*, *are*, *am*, and auxiliary *have* and *has*, e.g. *I ain't gonna do it* or *He ain't done it*.

(BE) 2. In some varieties of BE *ain't* corresponds to SE *didn't*. *He ain't go home*.

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Multiple Negation

(NS)

1. Negative concord: He didn't do anything. Negative attached to main verb and all indefinites following the main verb.

(NSNS/BE)

2. Preposed negative auxiliary: Couldn't nobody do it. A sentence with indefinite noun phrase having a negative marker before the main verb may have a negativized form of the verbal auxiliary placed at the beginning of the sentence, such as can't, wasn't and didn't.

(BE)

3. Negative auxiliary: Nobody didn't do it. The negative marker is placed in the noun phrase with the indefinite element, providing the NP comes before the main verb. In BE, both this rule and one which attaches a negative marker to the main verb are used.

(NS)

4. With negative adverbs: He never hardly does it. The adverb is used to express negation in addition to negative placement on another adverb, an auxiliary or a negativized indefinite (e.g. He never hardly does it, He don't hardly do it, and Hardly nobody is good).

(BE)

5. Negative concord across clause boundaries: occasionally, negative concord takes place across clauses. This results in sentences like There wasn't much I couldn't do with the meaning "There wasn't much I could do" or Ain't no cat can't get in no coop meaning that "no cat can get into any coop".

Possessive

(BE)

1. With common nouns: where 's possessive is found in SE, BE indicates possessives by the order of words. The boy's hat becomes The boy hat. BE speakers in Northern urban areas alternate between 's and its absence.

2. With personal names: 's is used with first name in compound noun forms as in John's Dawson car. This is an example of hypercorrection, resulting

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from some familiarity with the need to add possessive -s without knowledge of the SE rules for its placement in compound nouns.

Plural

(BE)

1. Absence of the plural suffix: plural suffixes of SE (-s or -es) are occasionally absent in BE. This results in He took five book and The other teacher, they'll yell at you. The absence of plural suffix in Northern urban BE occurs less often than the absence of the possive suffix. Most speakers of BE have the use of plural markers in their grammar.

   The absence of plural markers in cent and year is because the grammar of BE allows the optional use of plural markers with nouns of measure and is found in SWNS.

(SWNS/BE)

2. Regular plurals and irregular nouns: some nouns in SE form plurals by vowel change, one foot, two feet, or with no suffix at all (one deer, two deer). For some speakers, these nouns take the regular -s suffix (two foots, two deers).

Pronominal Apposition

(NS)

Pronominal apposition is the construction in which a pronoun is used in apposition to the noun subject of the sentence. The nominative form of the pronoun is used (My brother, he bigger than you or That teacher, she yell at the kids all the time).

Relative Clauses

(BE/SWNS)

1. Relative pronoun deletion: in most SE dialects a relative pronoun is obligatory if the relative pronoun represents the subject of the subordinate clause. In some NS dialects, this relative can be deleted, giving sentences like That's the dog bit me or There's a man comes down the road for "That's the dog that bit me" and "There's a man who comes down the road" respectively.

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(NS)

2. Associative use of which: in SE which is generally used to replace non-animate nouns. In some NS dialects (and also some SE ones) which can be used without this antecedent, appearing to be used as a type of associative or conjunction. This is found in sentences like He gave me this cigar which he knows I don't smoke cigars or His daughter is marrying Robert Jenks which he doesn't approve of her marrying a divorced man.

(NS)

3. Other relative pronoun forms: there are speakers of nonstandard English who use forms other than who, whom, which and that as relative pronouns. These speakers seem largely to be of White rural varieties of English. Examples appear in A car what runs is good to have and There's those as can do it.

Questions

(SWNS/BE)

1. Indirect questions: I want to know where did he go? The direct question for He went somewhere is Where did he go? For the indirect question, the inverted form of the direct is used "I want to know did he go?"

(SWNS/BE)

He wanted to know could he go for He wanted to know if he could go.

2. Uninverted forms: What that is? May represent an earlier form, which is giving way to inverted forms.

Existential it

(SWNS/BE)

It's a store on the corner. Is it a show in town? It is used in place of the standard English there, which serves an existential or expletive function.

Demonstratives

(NS)

1. Them for those: sentences like I want some of them candies use the demonstrative them where SE would have those.

2. Use of here and there as demonstratives:

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here and there may be added to the demonstratives these and them to produce sentences like I like these here pants better than them there ones.

Pronouns

(BE) 1. Nominative/objective neutralization: occasionally, the forms used in SE as objectives may be used as subjects, as in Him ain't playing. Mostly found to be strictly age-graded so that typically found only among pre-adolescents.

(NS) 2. Coordinate nominative/objective neutralization: in coordinate subject noun phrases, objective forms are much more common in all nonstandard varieties, giving Me and her will do it. or Him and me work together.

(BE) 3. Non-possessive case for possessives: occasionally nominative or objective case of personal pronouns may be used, giving James got him book or She want she mother.

(NS) 4. Absolute possessive forms: in SE the absolute possessive form of personal pronouns pattern according to the following paradigm:

Singular	Plural
mine	ours
yours	yours
his, hers, its	theirs

Except for mine, all the forms end in s. Some NS dialects regularize the pattern by adding -s to mine as well, giving mines. Others move in the other direction toward regularization, adding n to some of the other pronouns, producing yourn, hisn, hern, ourn and theirn.